



Strine, C.A. and Crouch, C.L. (2013) Yhwh's battle against chaos in Ezekiel: the transformation of Judahite mythology for a new situation. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 132 (4). pp. 883-903. ISSN 1934-3876

**Access from the University of Nottingham repository:**

<http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/42013/1/Yhwh%27s%20Battle%20against%20Chaos%20in%20Ezekiel.pdf>

**Copyright and reuse:**

The Nottingham ePrints service makes this work by researchers of the University of Nottingham available open access under the following conditions.

This article is made available under the University of Nottingham End User licence and may be reused according to the conditions of the licence. For more details see:  
[http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/end\\_user\\_agreement.pdf](http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/end_user_agreement.pdf)

**A note on versions:**

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the repository url above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact [eprints@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@nottingham.ac.uk)

# Yhwh's Battle against Chaos in Ezekiel: The Transformation of Judahite Mythology for a New Situation

C. A. Strine

c.a.strine@sheffield.ac.uk

University of Sheffield, Sheffield S3 7QB, United Kingdom

C. L. Crouch

carly.crouch@nottingham.ac.uk

University of Nottingham, Nottingham NG7 2RD, United Kingdom

## Abstract

In addressing the theological crisis of the exile, Ezekiel relies on the mythology of the divine king who goes out to battle against the forces of chaos, commonly referred to as the Chaoskampf. This article explores how Ezekiel employs this imagery to reconfigure Yhwh's relationships with Babylonia, Egypt, and Judah. In lieu of the now-defunct Judah, Ezekiel identifies the king of Babylon as Yhwh's earthly agent for establishing order; Egypt is (re)confirmed as the exemplary human chaotic force, opposing Yhwh and his Babylonian agent; and Judah's status is rendered a variable predicated on its political allegiances. Ezekiel's scheme allows the native Judahite Chaoskampf theology to remain intact, at the expense of drastic changes to the relationship between the Judahite monarch and his patron deity, Yhwh.

A recent piece by one of this article's authors argued that the book of Ezekiel's oracles against the nations rely heavily on the mythological tradition of the divine king who goes out to battle against the forces of chaos, commonly referred to as the Chaoskampf.<sup>1</sup> The argument noted that allusions to this tradition are not confined to Ezekiel 26–32 but pervade many of the passages describing Yhwh and Yhwh's actions. This article explores the way this imagery is used outside the oracles against the nations, demonstrating that the book of Ezekiel employs the Chaoskampf tradition to articulate its reconfigured understanding of Yhwh's relationships with Babylonia, Egypt, and Judah.

## I. Judah's Mythological Tradition

Before discussing Ezekiel's use of the Chaoskampf tradition it is useful to lay out this tradition's antecedent form, as the complexity of its use in Ezekiel derives from the book's efforts to modify the

---

<sup>1</sup> C. L. Crouch, "Ezekiel's Oracles against the Nations in Light of a Royal Ideology of Warfare," *JBL* 130 (2011): 473–92.

traditional Judahite version. It is, importantly, a tradition that is found in several forms across the ancient Near East: a battle between Baal and Yam is well known from the Ugaritic material and, in much nearer chronological and geographical proximity to Ezekiel, the battle between Marduk and Tiamat is well attested in the Mesopotamian tradition preserved in *Enūma eliš*.

In the Babylonian version, the goddess Tiamat's threat against the order of the universe is halted by the god Marduk, who claims kingship over the other gods as a result of his victory. As Tiamat is a deification of cosmic chaos, her defeat also enables the creation of an ordered universe, culminating in the construction of the temple for Marduk in Babylon. This is perhaps the best-known version of the Chaoskampf, and it is thus unsurprising that Chaoskampf allusions in the Hebrew Bible have often been presumed to derive from this Mesopotamian tradition.

John Day, however, established that a similar yet independent tradition was well known in Israel and Judah.<sup>2</sup> Though it is deliberately obscured in the Priestly version of creation in Genesis 1, other texts show that Judah knew of a myth in which it was Yhwh's victory over the forces of chaos, embodied as watery sea creatures that enabled the establishment of an ordered world.<sup>3</sup> Much as in the Babylonian celebration of Marduk's kingship, Yhwh's kingship was understood to derive from his successful defeat of chaotic forces, characterized as water or sea.

The strongest evidence for the Hebrew version of the Chaoskampf tradition occurs in the psalms, where the depiction of Yhwh as the one who battles against the sea is firmly associated with acclamations of Yhwh's kingship. For example, the association of Yhwh's kingship, creative activities, and battle against chaos occurs clearly in Psalm 93, in which the proclamation that "Yhwh is king" (v. 1) is followed by language alluding to the creation (v. 1) and a divine battle with the sea (v. 3). In Psalm 89, the theme of the battle against chaos at creation (vv. 10–11) is immediately preceded by language suggesting Yhwh's kingship over other gods (vv. 7–8). Psalm 24 is another case in which Yhwh's kingship (asserted in the fivefold declaration of vv. 7–10) is linked to a battle with the sea.<sup>4</sup> These texts indicate that there was a tradition in Judah linking the battle against chaos, Yhwh's kingship, and Yhwh's establishment of order at creation, even though the nature of the extant sources precludes offering a comprehensive catalogue of its key terms and images.<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel's

---

<sup>2</sup> See J. Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge Oriental Publications 35; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed exposition, see C. L. Crouch, *War and Ethics in the Ancient Near East: Military Violence in Light of Cosmology and History* (BZAW 407; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 29–32, 65–79.

<sup>4</sup> See Day, *God's Conflict*, 37–38, on the identification of Chaoskampf imagery in Psalm 24.

<sup>5</sup> One of the persistent difficulties in identifying allusions to a Yahwistic Chaoskampf in the Hebrew Bible is the lack of a standard Hebrew version of the myth, akin to *Enūma eliš* for Akkadian, wherein at least some of the specific Hebrew terminology for the myth's associated concepts might be clearly identified. In the absence of such a version, the identification of allusions usually relies on the accumulation of terms and phrases suggestive of Chaoskampf concepts, often with reference to particularities known from the non-Hebrew versions. Against this approach is Rebecca S. Watson, *Chaos Uncreated: A Reassessment of the Theme of "Chaos" in the Hebrew*

audience would thus have been familiar with these themes from their own native tradition as well as from being exposed to the Babylonian version during their exile in Babylon. The overarching structure of Ezekiel, which culminates with Yhwh as cosmic king ruling from the holy mountain at the center of the earth (5:5; 20:33–44; 40–48), suggests the importance of this set of concepts to the book.

The prominence of kingship in the Chaoskampf tradition, both in its content and in its application, should be stressed. The mythological account of Yhwh's victory over chaos, creative acts, and acknowledgment as king is linked directly with a royal ideology that claims it as the precedent for the military victories of the human king against his enemies on the battlefield. Yhwh and the Judahite king act in tandem to facilitate the ongoing defeat of chaotic forces, historically personified as the king's military enemies.

Two psalms clarify. In Psalm 18, Yhwh appears as the divine king who defeats the chaotic waters and then conveys this knowledge of warfare to the king.<sup>6</sup> The psalm speaks of Yhwh's weapons in meteorological terms (vv. 11–15): his chariot is the wind, he is clothed in clouds, and his actions culminate with “then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare” (v. 16).<sup>7</sup> Psalm 89 also expresses the unified purpose and activity of both god and human king in Yhwh's battle against chaos by closely paralleling the description of the king and the description of Yhwh (v. 14; cf. vv. 11, 22, 26).

As a consequence of this synergy, the defeat of the human king on the earthly battlefield posed serious problems with regard to the power and authority of the divine king. Bluntly, the human king's defeat implied the divine king's defeat. The exile, therefore, presented a devastating challenge to Yhwh's kingship: when the human king was captured and the people exiled, it suggested that Yhwh

---

*Bible* (BZAW 341; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), who rejects the idea of a biblical Chaoskampf because of the lack of a standard version, without observing that many biblical texts (Genesis 1; Isaiah 40–45; Ezekiel; Job) are actively engaged in creating revisionist versions of the myth.

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of Psalm 18, see Klaus-Peter Adam, *Der königliche Held: Die Entsprechung von kämpfendem Gott und kämpfendem König in Psalm 18* (WMANT 91; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001); and Crouch, *War and Ethics*, 68–70; contra Watson, *Chaos Uncreated*, 75–83. On the shared weaponry of divine and human kings, see Nicolas Wyatt, “Degrees of Divinity: Some Mythical and Ritual Aspects of West Semitic Kingship,” in *There's Such Divinity Doth Hedge a King': Selected Essays of Nicolas Wyatt on Royal Ideology in Ugaritic and Old Testament Literature* (SOTSMS; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 151–89.

<sup>7</sup> In v. 15, “lightning” is reading ברק with the LXX and 2 Sam 22:15. Cf. En. el. IV 35–49; also En. el. VI 80–84, where the net is placed with the bow in the presence of the gods as evidence of Marduk's victory. Citations of Enūma eliš refer to Philippe Talon, *Enūma Eliš: The Standard Babylonian Creation Myth* (SAA Cuneiform Texts 4; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2005). English translations may be found in Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford World's Classics; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Benjamin R. Foster, “The Babylonian Epic of Creation,” in COS 1:111. Thorkild Jacobsen offers a succinct description of the story and of the role of the net and bow (*The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976], 182).

had been defeated also. Though there are indications of ad hoc responses to Judah's smaller scale defeats prior to this time, the exile posed a more lasting and significant issue.<sup>8</sup> The existing framework could accommodate the temporary subordination of Yhwh's human agent to his enemies—envisioning it as a limited tolerance of chaotic dominance that allowed Yhwh to teach a moral lesson—without threatening Yhwh's ultimate control. The human king's permanent dethronement, however, indicated the triumph of chaos over both the human and divine agents of order. The Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and victory over the Judahite king were a major theological and ideological challenge to the adherents of the royal military ideology—in other words, the elites deported to Babylon.<sup>9</sup> Ezekiel's use of the Chaoskampf mythology is directly related to the theological issues posed by defeat, namely, the possibility that Yhwh had lost his status as divine king and creator. Ezekiel's object is to revise the mythological tradition in a way that would address the changed historical reality while maintaining Yhwh's claims to these titles.

## II. Ezekiel's Mythological Tradition: Setting the Scene

It is useful to offer a brief survey of the type and range of the allusions that appear throughout the book of Ezekiel prior to entering a more sustained discussion of how Ezekiel arranges Babylonia, Egypt, and Judah in his revised mythological framework. Individually, few of the following references necessitate a mythological interpretation generally, or the Chaoskampf in particular. Collectively, however, they indicate that Ezekiel is both aware of Judah's mythological tradition and, given the aforementioned historical circumstances, using it to make a deliberate point.<sup>10</sup>

The relevant language divides loosely into three groups: terms that refer to Yhwh's weaponry, terms relating to storm imagery, and terms that describe Yhwh's chaotic opponent. There are a number of

---

<sup>8</sup> Earlier attempts to address defeat as a means of divine punishment include 2 Samuel 7 and the final verses of Psalm 89, but both are concerned with short-term defeat. On Ezekiel as "reestablishing a conceptual system" in the face of a traumatic event, see Nancy R. Bowen, *Ezekiel* (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), xv–xix.

<sup>9</sup> Adding to this internal theological issue, of course, was the exiles' exposure to an alternative, Babylonian version of the divine battle against chaos, a version in which Marduk and his earthly counterpart, the Babylonian king, were the victorious proponents of cosmic order. In engaging the Chaoskampf mythology, therefore, Ezekiel must negotiate on two fronts: creating an internally viable revision of the native mythology, able to account convincingly for the audience's historical experience, while simultaneously denying the validity of the Babylonian version, in which Yhwh's defeat is explicable as part of Marduk's triumph and coronation as king of the gods.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Boadt concludes that "part of [Ezekiel's] program was to rework the religious tradition, the myth, of Israel in order to re-establish the authority and power of Yahweh as the only god.... Thus the mythological language is not merely mythopoetic, but consciously attacks the common Near Eastern divine myths as real threats to the faith of Israel" ("Rhetorical Strategies in Ezekiel's Oracles of Judgment," in *Ezekiel and His Book: Textual and Literary Criticism and Their Interrelation* [ed. Johan Lust; BETL 74; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1986], 199).

points of overlap between the first two categories, since the storm and its components form a regular division in Yhwh's arsenal.

Yhwh's use of storm elements as weapons has already been mentioned (Psalm 18; cf. Nahum 1; Isaiah 17; En. el. IV 35–49). Ezekiel draws on a wide range of storm phrases and motifs, beginning immediately with the harbinger of Yhwh's arrival from the north, the 1:4 (רוח סערה). Though not clearly systematic in this opening vision, the description in 1:24 of the wings of the creatures as "like the sound of many waters" (כקול מים רבים) and in 3:12–13 as making "a great roaring sound" (קול רעש) may be early indications of Ezekiel's (re)assertion of Yhwh's power over chaotic forces.<sup>11</sup> The storm and its components appear repeatedly through the following chapters: the storm wind (רוח) recurs in 13:11, 13 as one of the weapons of Yhwh's wrath, accompanied by driving rain (גשם) and great hailstones (אבני אלגביש). Both of the latter also appear in the Gog pericope in 38:22, preceded by references to Yhwh's use of storm (שאה) and cloud (ענן) to carry out his will (38:9). The east wind (רוח הקדים) plays a key role in exacting Yhwh's punishment in both 17:10 and 19:12, while it is to the winds (לכל רוח) that Yhwh's defeated are scattered in 5:10, 12; 12:14; and 17:21. Yhwh's battle storm (מחי קבלו) appears in 26:9.<sup>12</sup>

Yhwh's arsenal, however, is not confined to the storm and its related elements; it also extends to a set of weapons more usually associated with fishing. The characterization of the enemy as the sea or as a sea monster provides the conceptual explanation for this (29:3–5; 32:2–6). Foremost among these are the net, רשת (12:13; 17:20; 19:8; 32:3) or חרנים (26:5, 14; 47:10), and the snare, מצודה (12:13; 17:20) or שחח (19:4, 8; cf. Job 26:13; En. el. IV 95).<sup>13</sup> Last but not least, hooks, חכים (19:4, 9)—sometimes hooks specifically applied to the opponent's jaws, חכים בלחיך (38:4; 29:4)—are an explicitly identifiable weapon from Yhwh's Chaoskampf arsenal (Job 40:25–32; cf. En. el. IV 95–102).

There is no doubt that the sword (חרב) was among the weapons of Yhwh's arsenal; while its Chaoskampf overtones are more ambiguous, there is both internal and external evidence for this connotation. Within the Hebrew Bible, Job 40:15–32 and Isa 27:1, though likely postdating Ezekiel, provide support for a link between the sword and the Judahite Chaoskampf.<sup>14</sup> Outside the Hebrew Bible, the sword is used by Anat to kill Mot in the Ugaritic Baal Cycle and Erra (sometimes identified as Nergal, god of the netherworld) brandishes it in the Mesopotamian tale Erra and Ishum, where his

---

<sup>11</sup> On the mythical connections of the theophany, see Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 103–4. On 1:24 in particular, see further below.

<sup>12</sup> For this translation, see Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 22A; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 533.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Bodi demonstrates the connections between the net imagery and Mesopotamian mythology (*The Book of Ezekiel and the Poem of Erra* [OBO 104; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991], 162–82).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Ps 44:2–9, in which the deployment of the sword against Yhwh's enemies is associated with his kingship; perhaps also Ps 45:3–8 and Ps 89:44.

aggression is said to cause the mountains to stagger and the seas to roll.<sup>15</sup> In addition, this sword, when primed for action, flashes like lightning (Deut 32:41; Ezek 21:10, 15, 28; cf. Nah 3:3; Hab 3:11; Zech 9:14), linking it to the aforementioned storm imagery (2 Sam 22:15; Jer 10:12; 51:16; Pss 77:19; 97:4; 135:7; 144:6).<sup>16</sup>

Finally, on the other side of the conflict, references to the מים רבים, the many waters, occur several times, these being a manifestation of the chaotic opponent whose autonomy is persistently denied and whose subservience to Yhwh is consistently reiterated (1:24; 19:10; 26:19; 31:5 [מים only], 15).<sup>17</sup> Terminology of this kind is especially common in the overtly mythological material of the oracles against the nations, where the chaos monster, התנים הגדול (29:3; 32:2), the primordial deep, תהום (26:19; 31:5); and rivers, נהרות (31:15; 32:2), all put in an appearance.<sup>18</sup>

### III. Revising the Tradition: Ezekiel's Rendering of Yhwh's Battle against Chaos

Were Ezekiel's allusions to Judah's mythological tradition confined to these scattered references, the use of the tradition might be dismissed as little more than conventional language inherited from the book's predecessors. Yet the Chaoskampf tradition is not confined to these texts but appears in several additional passages, and in these Ezekiel's attempt to create a systematic, radical revision of the myth for a changed historical situation is evident. The key texts are Ezekiel 17; 19; 21; and the oracles against the nations in chs. 26–32; these will be treated in particular detail in what follows.

Prior to this, a final prefatory note: Ezekiel's revision of the Chaoskampf is bounded by the early-sixth-century political situation in the ancient Near East. This century was defined by two competing powers: Babylonia and Egypt. After the Babylonians had wrested control of Mesopotamia from Assyria, the southern Levant became the locus of imperial ambitions. Judah found itself at the center of conflict: from the east and north came the growing power of the Babylonians, while Egypt asserted

---

<sup>15</sup> CTA 6 ii 30–31; English translations in Dennis Pardee, "The Ba'lu Myth," COS 1.86: 241–74; and Nicolas Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit: The Words of Ilmilku and His Colleagues* (2nd ed.; Biblical Seminar 53; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 34–146. See also Erra III 65–69; cf. Erra I 1–12 (citations are from Luigi Cagni, *L'Epopea di Erra* [Studi Semitici 34; Rome: Istituto di Studi del Vicino Oriente dell'Università, 1969], 44–46; English translations in Luigi Cagni, "The Poem of Erra," *Sources from the Ancient Near East* 1 [1977]: 61–118; and Stephanie Dalley, "Erra and Ishum," COS 1.113: 404–16). Bodi demonstrates the connections between Erra and Ishum and Ezekiel, particularly Ezekiel 21 (*Poem of Erra*, 231–57; cf. Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 668–69, 679–81).

<sup>16</sup> For further discussion, see Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 22; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 445; and Jason Gile, "Ezekiel 16 and the Song of Moses: A Prophetic Transformation?" *JBL* 130 (2011): 87–108.

<sup>17</sup> On the mythological associations of מים רבים, see H. G. May, "Some Cosmic Connotations of Mayim Rabbim, 'Many Waters,'" *JBL* 74 (1955): 9–21; on the mythic connections of 1:24 in particular, see Paul Joyce, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 482; London: T&T Clark, 2007), 72; Margaret S. Odell, *Ezekiel* (Smith & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 2005), 30, and further discussion below.

<sup>18</sup> For further discussion of these in the oracles against the nations, see Crouch, "Ezekiel's Oracles," 479–87.

itself from the south and west. Since Yhwh's battle against chaos was intertwined with Judah's relationship to the surrounding foreign powers, it followed that any rendering of the Chaoskampf attempting to account for Judah's new political situation as a subdued and subordinate (non)entity had to account for the roles of Babylonia and Egypt in that framework. Ezekiel's attempt to sustain Judah's mythological tradition, therefore, raised fundamental questions about the function of the leaders of these two nations: Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Ezekiel's solution, briefly, is this: in lieu of the now-defunct Judah, Ezekiel identifies the king of Babylon as Yhwh's earthly agent for establishing order; Egypt is (re)confirmed as a chaotic force, opposing Yhwh and his Babylonian agent; and Judah's status is rendered a variable predicated on its political allegiances.

### The King of Babylon: Yhwh's Agent

The identification of the king of Babylon as the new human counterpart in Yhwh's battle against the forces of chaos is most obvious in Ezekiel 17, where the prophet describes the revised roles of the Babylonian, Judahite, and Egyptian monarchs. The Chaoskampf imagery that pervades this chapter transforms Yhwh's relationship with Babylonia and its king, demonstrating how Nebuchadnezzar operates as Yhwh's human agent, battling the Judahite king, Zedekiah, who is now identified as part of the chaotic forces that threaten Yhwh's created order.

The chapter has a twofold structure on both the literary and the conceptual level.<sup>19</sup> Ezekiel 17:1–10 is a riddle (חידה) and an allegory (משל) concerning the demise of the Judahite monarchy under Jehoiachin and Zedekiah, which the remainder of the chapter (vv. 11–21) interprets as a judgment on Jerusalem unfolding on two levels: the king of Babylon carries out the punishment in the human realm (vv. 16–18), an action then explained as an earthly manifestation of Yhwh's deeds in the divine realm (vv. 19–21). The chapter closes with a promise of future restoration that focuses on Yhwh's intention to return Jerusalem and its political leader to prominence.

While the description of the human aspects of the battle against chaos is characterized by prosaic, nonmythological statements (17:16–18), the following verses connect events in the human register with those in the divine register. Thus, vv. 19–21 are replete with Chaoskampf imagery: Yhwh deploys the net, wind, and sword against Jerusalem and Zedekiah, effecting with these weapons the same result as Nebuchadnezzar's assault. In this way, the text affirms that Yhwh remains the divine agent in the Chaoskampf, which is necessary insofar as it prevents the audience from concluding that Marduk, and not Yhwh, is the divine agent behind Nebuchadnezzar's actions.

The first indication in ch. 17 that Nebuchadnezzar's defeat of Judah is no mere human military engagement occurs with the appearance of the east wind, רוח הקדים (17:10), a recognizable component

---

<sup>19</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 317–20.



of the divine arsenal, hostile to all life. Complementing רוח הקדים, v. 20 affirms Yhwh as the divine king and warrior by identifying the net as another of his weapons: Yhwh spreads out his net, ופרשתי עליו רשת, and seizes Zedekiah in it, ונתפש במצודתי (cf. 12:13; 19:8; 32:3). The lack of a comprehensive Hebrew rendering of Yhwh's battle against chaos makes it difficult to determine the precise connotations of the image in Ezekiel, although the appearance of the net in Marduk's arsenal may be indicative (En. el. IV 41–44): Ezekiel may be reiterating that the net is a weapon of Yhwh and not Marduk.<sup>20</sup>

Ezekiel's reference to Yhwh's use of the net against Zedekiah represents a significant transformation of the inherited tradition. In order to maintain order in the world, Yhwh is obliged to use this weapon against the Judahite king, rather than on his behalf (on the reason for this, see below). This, in turn, requires a non-Judahite agent to wield the net. The identification of the non-Judahite agent as the king of Babylon further necessitates the specific identification of the net as Yhwh's, not Marduk's, because the latter would be the expected divine agent behind a Babylonian king. Finally, the cooperation between Yhwh as the divine agent and the Babylonian king as the human agent redefines the role of the latter: the king of Babylon becomes Yhwh's agent in ordering the cosmos rather than fulfilling his expected role as a chaotic force.

The final metaphor in Ezekiel 17 to discuss is the sword. As noted previously, the sword's connotations are somewhat elusive, and on its own it would be insufficient to substantiate the presence of a Chaoskampf background. In the larger context of the chapter, however, it is likely that the sword contributes to the Chaoskampf imagery. This impression is reinforced by Ezek 21:13–22 (Eng. 21:8–17), the so-called Song of the Sword, where this weapon functions as a metonym for both Yhwh's judgment and the human agent who implements it.<sup>21</sup> The cosmological milieu of both texts is underscored by the results of the divine action: Yhwh makes low that which is high and lifts up that which is lowly (Ezek 17:24; 21:31; cf. En. el. IV 5–8).<sup>22</sup>

Grasping the transformation of Nebuchadnezzar's place in the Chaoskampf myth explains, in part, Ezekiel's omission of an oracle against Babylon, which has puzzled scholars: the book's ideological presuppositions, understood in light of the cosmological tradition and Ezekiel's adaptation of it, specifically exclude such an oracle. The Babylonian king is the one who acts rightly and justly, defending order. Judgment against Babylon, in this framework, would result in an increase, not a decrease, of chaos.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> It is also possible that Ezekiel has in mind the use of the net in Erra and Ishum as well; see Bodi, *Poem of Erra*, 162–82, for discussion.

<sup>21</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, 441.

<sup>22</sup> See *ibid.*, 433–34.

<sup>23</sup> Carol Newsom, “A Maker of Metaphors: Ezekiel's Oracles against Tyre,” in *Interpreting the Prophets* (ed. James Luther Mays and Paul J. Achtemeier; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 190–91.

## Egypt as a Chaotic Force

Ezekiel 17 clearly identifies Nebuchadnezzar as the agent of Yhwh, and this change draws into question the status of Egypt. Ezekiel's response is unequivocal: Egypt represents chaos. Egypt thus remains in its traditional role as Yhwh's chaotic opponent, threatening to interfere with Yhwh's royal rule and control over the universe. Indeed, Egypt embodies chaos to the extent that other nations who align themselves with it become chaotic by association. This corrupting effect serves as a significant factor in Yhwh's rejection of the Judahite king, as is evident from the imagery used in the key passages of Ezekiel 17 and 19.

First, however, Ezekiel identifies Egypt as a chaotic force, opposed to YHWH and whom Yhwh will inevitably defeat. This is achieved by persistently describing Egypt and Pharaoh in chaotic terms and associating both with images of chaos as manifest in the human realm. This culminates in the oracles against the nations (chs. 29–32), where numerous allusions and images combine to cast Egypt in the role of the monster of chaos.<sup>24</sup> These images are especially prominent in the oracles that frame the group, ch. 29 and ch. 32, where Egypt is explicitly called the great sea monster, התנים הגדול (29:3; 32:2), dwelling in the waters of the Nile (29:3), identified as the primordial river(s), נהרות (32:2; cf. 31:15). Its conquest is described in terms familiar from Yhwh's Chaoskampf weaponry: the net, רשת (32:3; cf. Job 26:13; En. el. IV 95) and hooks in its jaws, חכים בלחייך (29:4; cf. Job 40:25–32; En. el. IV 95–102). The image of receding waters leaving dry land occurs several times in these chapters (29:10; 30:12; 32; cf. Jer 51:36; Nah 1:4; Isa 50:2) to indicate the containment of the chaotic waters above and below the firmaments, another recurring motif in biblical references to the Chaoskampf.

While Egypt is most clearly connected with chaos in these oracles against the nations, the indictment of Egypt as the chaotic enemy of Yhwh begins in chs. 17 and 19. Both chapters use mythological imagery in which a tree or vine nourished by the מים רבים represents a challenge to Yhwh's royal authority. Each chapter represents a variation on the theme; together they create a series of allegorical portraits identifying Egypt as a chaotic force and condemning those who ally themselves with it.

This imagery is used in chs. 17 and 19 (on which more below) but is clearest in ch. 31, in the midst of several chapters devoted to identifying Egypt as chaos.<sup>25</sup> Though the imagery in this chapter is more usually associated with Genesis 2–3, the chapter exhibits a remarkable number of references to the

---

<sup>24</sup> For a more detailed exposition, see Crouch, "Ezekiel's Oracles," 479–84.

<sup>25</sup> This is presuming that the "Assyria" in 31:3 is either an errant reference or an object lesson for Egypt, and that the metaphor is aimed at Egypt, as 31:2, 18 suggest. For an alternative interpretation, see, among others, Christoph Auffarth, *Der drohende Untergang: "Schöpfung" in Mythos und Ritual im alten Orient und in Griechenland am Beispiel der Odyssee und des Ezechielbuches* (Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 39; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991), who associates it with Egyptian mythology. For a discussion of the Eden tradition in Ezekiel 31, see Terje Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden: Genesis 2–3 and Symbolism of the Eden Garden in Biblical Hebrew Literature* (CBET 25; Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 391–93.

Chaoskampf tradition, including the persistent and repeated use of language referring to the primeval waters: the many waters, מים רבים (31:5, 15), the deep, תהום (31:4), and the primordial rivers, נהרות (31:15).<sup>26</sup> One of the few scholars to note this imagery is Margaret S. Odell, who observes that the use of מים רבים and תהום in conjunction indicates that “this is not simply a naturalistic image” but are terms “elsewhere ... associated with the primordial waters of chaos.”<sup>27</sup>

Ezekiel 31, furthermore, combines the images of watery chaos with the depiction of a primeval garden and its arrogant usurper of divine power to create a description of Egypt as a threat to Yhwh’s royal authority. Particularly pertinent to the imagery in chs. 17 and 19 is that Egypt is portrayed as gaining its strength from the primordial waters, the very waters checked by Yhwh’s punishment (31:15). Although the usage in 31:5 could be taken as simply an agricultural description, the overabundance of Chaoskampf imagery in the chapter argues otherwise. The indisputably mythical use of the waters in 31:15 is most significant here: it describes the upper and lower firmaments, the divided body of the defeated chaotic power, beyond which are corralled the waters themselves (En. el. IV 137–38; cf. Genesis 1). Egypt is allied with and nourished by the waters of chaos and will be destroyed by Yhwh in his royal power.

Variations on this depiction of Egypt occur in chs. 17 and 19. In the latter, Ezekiel pronounces a dirge over a Judahite queen mother possessed of two sons who rose to the throne of Judah. This challenging text is a dirge (קִינָה) for the princes (נְשִׂאִים) of Israel, filled with dense imagery and divided into two parts: 19:1–9 uses lion imagery to describe the schemes of the queen mother and her ruling sons, while 19:10–14 portrays the queen mother as a vine and her sons as branches.<sup>28</sup> In both sections the lions are captured with hooks and net, identifying them as chaotic opponents of Yhwh. Of particular interest with regard to Egypt, however, is that vv. 10–14 describe the lioness as a vine planted beside the מים and producing fruit and branches by the nourishment of the מים רבים (v. 10). This vine is ultimately destroyed by (Yhwh’s) east wind, רֵיחַ הַקִּדִּים (v. 12; cf. 17:10), which dries up its branches and the surrounding territory (vv. 12–13; cf. 29:10; 30:12; 32). Again, although a merely agricultural metaphor is possible, the overall occurrence of these terms in Ezekiel suggests a more complex usage.

The portrayal of Egypt with arboreal imagery makes a clear statement about Egypt’s mythological status. Although this is obscure to the modern reader removed from the ancient political context, the identification of the figures and an awareness of their political trajectories suggest that Ezekiel’s

---

<sup>26</sup> In its plural form, נהרות can be related “aux eaux souterraines et cosmiques, aux eaux primordiales, au Grand Océan qui est identique au chaos” (Carl-A. Keller and René Vuilleumier, *Michée, Nahoum, Habacuc, Sophonie* [CAT 11b; Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1971], 124; cf. Lawrence Boadt, *Ezekiel’s Oracles against Egypt: A Literary and Philological Study of Ezekiel 29–32* [BibOr 37; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1980], 106). See also Hab 3:9–10; Ps 93:3–4; Nah 2:7, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Odell, *Ezekiel*, 240.

<sup>28</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 354–55. Ezekiel 19:10–14 may be an expansionary interpretation of 19:8–9. On the connotations of נְשִׂאִים, see below.

audience would have understood the dirge to be accusing the lioness of allying herself with Egypt. The imagery specifies the offense as cooperation with chaotic forces in the following way.

The first half of the dirge (19:2–9) describes the lioness as having reared two claimants to the throne; the first was deposed and deported to Egypt (v. 4), whereupon the lioness schemed to install the second. There is much debate over the identities of the lioness and her two cubs, but the available information about the lineages of the final kings of Judah strongly suggests that the lioness should be identified as Hamutal, the only royal spouse of the late seventh century to raise not one but two sons to the throne of Judah (2 Kgs 23:31; 24:18).<sup>29</sup> The first of these, Jehoahaz, was indeed deported to Egypt (2 Kgs 23:34); the second was Zedekiah, who came to the throne after his brother Jehoiachim and nephew Jehoiachin vacated.<sup>30</sup> Zedekiah, a familiar target for Ezekiel's wrath (see Ezek 12:8–16; 17:1–24; 21:29–32; cf. 22:6–12), is the indirect object of the dirge.

Given this interpretation of the figures' identities, the support of the מים רבים for the lioness and, by extension, her sons, is suggestive. Zedekiah, it is clear, hoped that Egypt would aid him in fighting the Babylonians; it seems probable that the queen mother endorsed this move. Certainly Ezekiel 19 portrays Hamutal as actively involved in Zedekiah's ascent to the throne (v. 5) as well as wielding significant royal power herself (v. 11). Ezekiel's condemnation of Zedekiah is elsewhere linked to his reliance on Egypt and, in particular, his corresponding rejection of the Babylonians, whom Ezekiel sees as Yhwh's human agent. This accusation against Zedekiah coincides with Ezekiel 29–32, where Egypt emerges as the archetype of chaos in the human realm.

Although it is only implicit to the modern reader, the reference in 19:10 to the lioness in floral form being supported by the מים רבים would have been understood by Ezekiel's audience as an assertion about the source of the lioness's power, namely, in the watery forces of chaos representing Egypt. Furthermore, the defeat of the vine and branches by the east wind (19:12) refers to a military force under Babylonian control that is able to defeat the chaotic power and its devotees. Familiarity with the current political situation, combined with recognition of the identities of the lioness and her second cub, would have enabled an ancient audience to recognize the מים רבים as Egypt, from whom the

---

<sup>29</sup> Greenberg (*Ezekiel 1–20*, 355–57) and Block (*Ezekiel 1–24*, 603–7) provide overviews of the issues in assigning historical referents to the characters in this passage.

<sup>30</sup> See J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (2nd ed.; London: SCM, 2006), 461–77. Regarding the intervening kings, Jehoiachim died of unknown causes (2 Kgs 24:6) and Jehoiachin was deported to Babylon (2 Kgs 24:12, 15); neither fits the description of the lioness's first son. Solely on the basis of deportation to Babylon it is possible to view the second cub as Jehoiachin, but the imagery militates against this: Jehoiachin is the son of Nehushta (2 Kgs 24:8) and identifying the two cubs as Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin respectively would thus render the image of the lioness with two cubs meaningless. The language used to describe the fate of the second cub is also the same as that used to describe the fate of Zedekiah in Ezek 17:20 (cf. also 17:10).

Judahite queen mother and princes draw their strength. This same knowledge would point to the Babylonian king as the agent of Yhwh's order pitted against the forces of chaos.

A similar use of the nourishing chaotic waters occurs in ch. 17, an allegory where two eagles vie for the allegiance of the vine.<sup>31</sup> The vine is Zedekiah, installed by the Babylonians; the first and second eagles are the kings of Babylonia and Egypt respectively. According to the allegory, the king of Babylon installed Zedekiah “beside many waters,” על מים רבים (17:5), expecting him to remain loyal to Babylon (17:6, 13–14).

Although interpreters agree that the phrase על מים רבים denotes proximity and the מים רבים are elsewhere widely accepted to represent chaos, scholars consistently interpret 17:5 in a nonadversarial sense, with the majority viewing it as a description of the positive character of the vine's seedbed.<sup>32</sup> In view of the overwhelming evidence that the מים רבים represent chaos, this view cannot be accepted; the use of the same phrase elsewhere in Ezekiel in the context of mythological chaos provides a strong case for seeing the term as an allusion to chaos here also. Odell is correct when she writes that although the מים רבים “appears to be innocuous ... its use elsewhere suggests that it has a more sinister connotation.”<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, this interpretation allows a straightforward mapping of the chaotic images onto the historical events.<sup>34</sup> The southern Levant in the late seventh and early sixth centuries was contested territory. Judah, one of the southernmost states in this region, stood on Babylonia's southern frontier, a bastion against Egyptian incursions into the Levantine territory that Babylonia intended to claim for itself. In this context, the description of the Babylonian king's installation of Zedekiah “beside many waters” yet with roots and branches turning toward Babylonia may be read as a reference to Zedekiah's sworn role as a loyal Babylonian vassal (17:5–6, 13–14). The מים רבים beside which the vine is planted are the chaos waters manifest: the threatening power of Egypt.

Zedekiah, however, turns his allegiance to the very מים רבים against which he is meant to defend, hoping that its support would be greater than the assistance of the distant Babylonian who had put him in power (17:7–8, 15). In so doing, he no longer acts as a buffer against Egypt on behalf of Babylon but becomes the advanced front of the Egyptian threat to Nebuchadnezzar's western border. This

---

<sup>31</sup> Note Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 359: “Some have taken this oracle [Ezekiel 19] to be a continuation of the eagle-cedar-vine allegory of ch. 17; the two are indeed similar”; cf. Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 599.

<sup>32</sup> Walther Zimmerli, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, vol. 1, Chapters 1–24 (trans. Ronald E. Clements; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1979), 362; Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 310; Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 531; Joyce, *Ezekiel*, 136.

<sup>33</sup> Odell, *Ezekiel*, 240.

<sup>34</sup> The reading that follows also avoids a problem for the majority reading in 17:8, where the preposition אל is usually emended (without evidence) to על in order to agree with the reading of 17:5. This unsubstantiated change is avoidable if the many waters represent Egypt: the final phrase of 17:7 and 17:8a explain that the vine has turned its allegiance from (מִי) the first eagle to (אֵל) the many waters.

interpretation is confirmed by 17:15, which describes how Zedekiah sent ambassadors to Egypt to request military reinforcement, a concrete manifestation of Judah's alliance with Egypt against Babylon.

Ezekiel 17:19–21 specifies that Zedekiah's turn from Babylon to Egypt constituted an offense not only against his Babylonian overlord but against Yhwh. The language used in both the allegory and the interpretation presents Zedekiah's choice as not merely between Babylonia and Egypt but between Yhwh and chaos: the *מים רבים* beside which Zedekiah is planted and the Egypt against which he is to defend Babylonian interests are one and the same chaotic enemy. His turn toward the Egyptian *מים רבים* and away from Babylonia constitutes an alignment with the forces of chaos. Yhwh responds by wielding his Chaoskampf weapons against Zedekiah (as discussed above with reference to Babylon: *רוח הקדים* [17:10]; also *מצודתי* and *רשתי* [17:20]).

Although Ezekiel 17; 19; and 31 develop the image of the tree or vine nourished by the *מים רבים* in different ways, they each clearly identify the *מים רבים* with Egypt. Not only Egypt but any who are allied with it are categorized as a chaotic force, opposed to Yhwh and the target of divine wrath executed with Yhwh's particular Chaoskampf weapons. Reiterated variously in the oracles in chs. 29–32, the images leave no doubt that Ezekiel's modified Chaoskampf structure maintains the traditional role of Egypt: it is unquestionably and irrevocably identified as chaos.

One final objection might be advanced against this interpretation of the *מים רבים*: given their place in Yhwh's theophany and their integral place in Yhwh's chariot (1:24; 43:2), how can the *מים רבים* represent chaos? The clear answer to this query is that Yhwh has defeated the waters and harnessed their power. The chaotic and adversarial connotation of the *מים רבים* is not absent in these texts, merely latent. Yhwh, like many ancient suzerains, not only conquers the *מים רבים* but subordinates his defeated enemy in a public and symbolic way. The theophanic demonstration of this subordination occurs in the opening and closing scenes to underscore Yhwh's victory.<sup>35</sup>

#### The Future of Judah and Its *נשיא*

The identification of Babylon as Yhwh's human agent in the battle against chaos and the reaffirmation of Egypt as the principal earthly manifestation of that chaos establish the roles of the major players in Yhwh's Chaoskampf, but leave open the matter of Judah. Our analyses of Ezekiel 17 and 19 have already suggested that the crucial issue in Ezekiel's assessment of Judah is the alliance of the Judahite monarchy with Egypt. By aligning the nation with chaotic Egypt, the kings of Judah effectively identify Judah as a chaotic force too. Judah accordingly becomes a target in Yhwh's campaign for order, led by Yhwh's human agent, the king of Babylon.

---

<sup>35</sup> Odell, *Ezekiel*, 30.

Although the consequences of this alignment are relatively straightforward in the present tense (alignment with chaos necessitates destruction by Yhwh's agent), the reconfiguration also impacts Ezekiel's conception of the future. Having brought the steadfast association of Judah with Yahwistic order into doubt, the king of Judah can no longer be unquestioningly allied with order; although the nation's future leaders may once again side with Yhwh, their role cannot be what it once was.

This is nowhere more evident than in the duties and title given to the Judahite ruler in Ezekiel's eschatological vision, where the power and responsibility of the future Davidic leader are restricted in numerous ways. In view of the strongly militaristic content of the Chaaskampf, it is not coincidental that many of these restrictions occur in the military sphere. Indeed, analysis of the relevant texts in Ezekiel indicates that the key modification in the role outlined for the future Davidic leader of Judah is that Yhwh no longer entrusts him to subdue chaos by engaging militarily with the foreign nations who embody that force. Because military activity is central to the ancient Near Eastern concept of kingship, this absence necessitates a change in the terminology applied to the future Davidic leader(s): no longer is this man known as king, מלך, but is instead called prince, נשיא.<sup>36</sup> This substitution reflects the rearranged framework brought about by the destruction of Jerusalem: the military aspect of kingship, core to the concept of מלך in the Near Eastern mythological framework, no longer belongs to the Davidic line.<sup>37</sup> Even though future Davidides may realign Judah with Yhwh's purposes, the individual heads of the nation will never regain their pre-587 B.C.E. status as the military arm of Yhwh in the fight against chaos.

The immediate and obvious issue with this interpretation is that Ezekiel apparently does refer to both past (1:2; 7:27; 17:12, 16) and, vitally, to future (37:22, 24; cf. 34:24) Davidic leader(s) as מלך. Closer inspection of these references, however, demonstrates that they are consistent with our proposal.

The first case is the superscription to Ezekiel. It is likely that the reference to King Jehoiachin in Ezek 1:2 is part of an editorial insertion synchronizing the indefinite dates of 1:1. Even so, the decision to date all events around Jehoiachin's reign has an ideological edge. Despite the brevity of Jehoiachin's

---

<sup>36</sup> See also Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel* (VTSup 61; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 17–18.

<sup>37</sup> This conclusion impinges on the long-running debate about the significance and meaning of the title נשיא in Ezekiel. Although some argue that the term reflects a decision to abandon the Davidic monarchy entirely (Otto Procksch, "Fürst und Priester bei Hesekiel," ZAW 58 [1940–41]: 99–133; K. Koch, "Die Eigenart der priesterschriftlichen Sinaigesetzgebung," ZTK 55 [1958]: 40–41; Walther Zimmerli, "Planungen für den Wiederaufbau nach der Katastrophe von 587," VT 18 [1968]: 229–55; cf. Jon D. Levenson, *Theology of the Program of Restoration of Ezekiel 40–48* [HSM 10; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976], 57–73; Duguid, *Leaders*, 10–33), the weight of evidence indicates that נשיא, like מלך, denotes a future leader from the Davidic line, while substantially modifying the role of the Davidide (Levenson, *Restoration*, 57–73; Ronald M. Hals, *Ezekiel* [FOTL 19; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 274; Steven S. Tuell, *The Law of the Temple in Ezekiel 40–48* [HSM 49; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992], 103–8; Duguid, *Leaders*, 55–57). Madhavi Nevader, for example, has recently argued that Ezekiel does not radically alter the office of מלך itself but rather places Yhwh alone in the role (*Yahweh versus David: The Monarchic Debate of Deuteronomy and Ezekiel* [Oxford Theological Monographs; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013]).

three-month reign as king, his time in power was distinguished in one crucial regard from his predecessor (his father, Jehoiachim) and his successor (Zedekiah): while both of those leaders aligned with Egypt and resisted Babylon, Jehoiachin surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar.<sup>38</sup> Ezekiel's altered mythological framework construes this submission as an act of alignment with Yhwh's agent that increased order. Thus, in Ezek 1:2 and also later in Ezek 17:12, Jehoiachin is given the title מֶלֶךְ because he aligned Judah with the forces of order, albeit in a rather unusual fashion.

The second case is Ezek 7:27, which concludes an oracle of judgment that graphically foretells the destruction of Jerusalem. There is good reason to disregard this instance purely on textual grounds but, if מֶלֶךְ is original, the term serves to clarify its referent and as a reflection of Ezekiel's demotion of Zedekiah.<sup>39</sup> There is also an ideological significance to the usage here, with מֶלֶךְ in immediate parallel with נָשִׂיא. Through this parallelism מֶלֶךְ can be used to specify Zedekiah as the individual in question, but the use of נָשִׂיא makes clear that his behavior warrants only the lesser title. It is notable in this regard that the first reference to Zedekiah as נָשִׂיא alone (12:10, 12) occurs immediately after Yhwh's destruction of Jerusalem, a conceptual break in the book that represents divine abandonment of the Judahite monarchy.<sup>40</sup>

These references aside, many scholars see an even greater significance in the way the terms מֶלֶךְ and נָשִׂיא are used with respect to the future leadership of Judah. In the following discussion some attention will be given to the role the נָשִׂיא plays in the temple vision of Ezekiel 40–48, but the argument is more intimately tied to ch. 34 and 37:15–28.<sup>41</sup> Both of these texts render the future leader of Judah responsible for only one-half of the traditional remit of the ancient Near Eastern king, as indicated by the use of shepherd imagery to the exclusion of warrior imagery, and this leader is accordingly identified not as the מֶלֶךְ of Judah but as its נָשִׂיא.

Ezekiel 34 declares judgment on the “shepherds of Israel” (vv. 1–10), explains that Yhwh will rescue the persecuted “flock” (vv. 11–22), and concludes by detailing the future leadership of this community (vv. 23–31). The final section opens with the well-known statement “I will place over them one shepherd, he will feed them / my servant David will shepherd them / he will be their shepherd” (v. 23). Since the title “shepherd” was invested with royal connotations in the ancient Near

---

<sup>38</sup> Miller and Hayes, *Ancient Israel and Judah*, 468; Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 11–13; Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 12.

<sup>39</sup> The LXX omits it. See Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 200, 209, and Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 156–57, for discussions of the various textual traditions. With regard to 7:27 and 17:12, Steven S. Tuell argues that “[מֶלֶךְ] is used in a more technical sense, as a title contrasted with other titles” because “in these contexts, the use of [נָשִׂיא] would be confusing or impossible” (*Law of the Temple*, 105–6).

<sup>40</sup> With regard to Ezek 17:16, it is noteworthy that Zedekiah is not called מֶלֶךְ, but is said to be caused to reign by Nebuchadnezzar, המֶלֶךְ הַמְמַלִּיךְ אֹתוֹ (“the king who made him king”). Zedekiah might be implied to be a מֶלֶךְ, but the underlying point is that his reign is predicated on his appointment by Yhwh's agent, the king of Babylon.

<sup>41</sup> For detailed analyses of chs. 40–48, see Levenson, *Restoration*, 55–107; Tuell, *Law of the Temple*, 103–52; Duguid, *Leaders*, 10–57; and Nevader, *Yahweh versus David*, 111–66.



East, many commentators take this as a statement that Ezekiel envisions a restoration of the Davidic line to its previous position. Yet in the very next verse this eschatological Davidide is called not מלך, the anticipated title of a truly restored Davidic ruler, but נשיא, raising the question of why a title matching the normal royal image does not appear. The answer lies in the respective roles of this future ruler and Yhwh.

The Davidic leader is called a shepherd and given the explicit task of “feeding” the community. All other duties remain under Yhwh’s purview alone.<sup>42</sup> Most notably, Yhwh drives the wild animals from the land (v. 25), promises to prevent foreign conquest (v. 28), and ends the taunting of the neighboring nations (v. 29). That is to say, Yhwh performs all the military activities that might in the earthly realm devolve to his human agent, and in so doing he establishes order in the cosmos without using a human agent to mediate this effort. Yhwh is not explicitly identified as the sole מלך in the future cosmological framework, but he retains responsibilities that are given to the human king in the traditional rendering.<sup>43</sup> The Davidide remains the head of the Judahite polity and continues to perform prominent cultic functions, but he is no longer the human complement to the divine warrior. Because Yhwh will battle and subdue chaos directly, the need for a human counterpart is obviated.

This same limitation on the role of the future leader of Judah occurs in Ezek 37:15–28. This passage, the final sign-act in the book, involves the prophet taking two sticks—one for Judah and one for Israel—and tying them together to symbolize the future reunification of the northern and southern kingdoms (vv. 15–19). The interpretation comes in two parts. Verses 21–23 say that Yhwh will return the people to their land, where they will have one king (v. 22). This first מלך (v. 22) is an unnamed future ruler of a reunited Israel and Judah. Though this statement could have in mind the Davidide specified in v. 24, the logical flow of the passage suggests that it is Yhwh himself who will make the two communities into one nation (v. 22a). It is thus probable that the statement envisions Yhwh, not a human Judahite, as the “one king” over that community.<sup>44</sup> This verse alone is, therefore, an insufficient basis for any argument contending that Ezekiel invests the future Davidide with the same responsibilities as the preexilic מלך.

The second half of the interpretation, found in 37:24–26, presents the real interpretative crux: in v. 24 Yhwh declares, “my servant David will be king [מלך] over them, a single shepherd he will be for all of them.” The apparent sense of this is that Ezekiel envisions a full reestablishment of the Davidic monarchy to its preexilic prominence.

---

<sup>42</sup> When ch. 34 is read in conjunction with the temple patronage assigned to the נשיא in chs. 40–48, it makes sense to connect the shepherd’s role of feeding the people in ch. 34 with that duty.

<sup>43</sup> Nevader, *Yahweh versus David*, 144–47, 161–65. Levenson (*Restoration*, 99) makes a similar case for the stripping of political responsibility from the Judahite monarch.

<sup>44</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, 706–7; Block, *Ezekiel 25–48*, 292–93.

But there are reasons to doubt that things are quite so straightforward. The first hint that something may be amiss is 37:25, where Yhwh explains, “my servant David will be a נשיא for them forever.” This is supported by the LXX, where there is strong evidence for a Hebrew Vorlage that contained נשיא in vv. 22, 24. Scholars have long been troubled that the LXX translates with ἄρχων in both instances (the term most often used to render נשיא) and not βασιλεύς (the anticipated term for מלך).<sup>45</sup> Although this is not conclusive, the LXX’s use of ἄρχων in both verses suggests that the Vorlage had נשיא, a designation for the Davidide consonant with the limitation of his role.<sup>46</sup>

In further support of the text-critical data is the strong evidence that 37:24–28 represents part of a late addition to the text, composed separately from 37:15–23.<sup>47</sup> In connection with this issue, William A. Tooman has cogently argued that the Gog oracles of chs. 38–39 “might be more accurately called ‘thematic pastiche,’ pastiche constructed from texts that revolve, by in large, around select themes.”<sup>48</sup> Precisely the same sort of “thematic pastiche” is visible in vv. 24–28, and in view of these features—along with the evidence from p967 that this chapter originally followed the Gog oracles and introduced chs. 40–48—it is reasonable to propose that vv. 24–28 came into the text at a late stage in order to smooth the transition from the sign-act interpretation into the Gog pericope.<sup>49</sup> It is probable

---

<sup>45</sup> Ashley S. Crane argues that נשיא in the MT reflects a strengthening of the military overtones in the text as part of a “‘call to arms’, which required a military Davidic leader” (*Israel’s Restoration: A Textual-Comparative Exploration of Ezekiel 36–39* [VTSup 122; Leiden: Brill, 2008], 119–26; see esp. the argument on 123 regarding the varying chapter order of Ezekiel 37–39 in the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts). See also John W. Olley, *Ezekiel: A Commentary Based on Iezekiël in Codex Vaticanus* (Septuagint Commentary Series; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 495, who suggests that in the LXX the term refers to “spiritual and political leadership, with no military aspects.” For a rebuttal, see Daniel I. Block, “Transformation of Royal Ideology in Ezekiel,” in *Transforming Visions: Transformations of Text, Tradition, and Theology in Ezekiel* (ed. William A. Tooman, and Michael A. Lyons; PTMS; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), 208–46 (an update of his commentary on Ezek 37:15–28).

<sup>46</sup> If this is so, it would in turn imply that the unnamed leader of 37:22, in the present text apparently referring to Yhwh’s kingship over Judah and Israel, would have been read originally as a reference to the future Davidide’s leadership (but not his kingship).

<sup>47</sup> One ought to note that, even as the text stands, the context of 37:24 provides minimal evidence regarding the future Davidic leader’s role. Apart from stating that this figure will be a king (apparently) and a shepherd, the text is silent on what he will do. The only possible way to surmise this leader’s function is to extrapolate from the text’s similarity to 34:23–31, which clearly divests the Davidic leader of precisely the military role given to him in the traditional Chaoskampf framework.

<sup>48</sup> Tooman, “Transformation of Israel’s Hope: The Reuse of Scripture in the Gog Oracles,” in Tooman et al., *Transforming Visions*, 80.

<sup>49</sup> In Ezek 37:24, “my servant David” and “shepherd”: cf. Ezekiel 34; Jer 23:3–4. In Ezek 37:25, connections to the patriarchal tradition: cf., e.g., Exod 6:2–8; Numbers 13–14. In Ezek 37:26, “covenant of peace”: cf. Ezekiel 34; Isa 54:10; “eternal covenant”: cf., e.g., Gen 9:16; 17:7, 13, 19; Exod 31:16; Lev 24:8; Ps 105:10. In Ezek 37:27, the covenant formula: cf. Gen 17:8; Exod 29:45; Jer 24:7; 31:33; 32:38; Ezek 11:20; 14:11; 37:23; Zech 8:8; see also Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation* (trans. Margaret Kohl; OTS; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998). In Ezek 37:28, “the nations shall know that I am Yhwh”: see Walther Zimmerli, *Erkenntnis Gottes nach dem Buche Ezechiel: Eine Theologische Studie* (ATANT 27; Zurich: Zwingli, 1954). Tooman offers a similar argument from a more limited set of texts (Leviticus 26 and Ezekiel) in “Covenant Presence in the Composition and Theology of Ezekiel,” in *Divine Presence and Absence*

such a composition would “desire to settle certain unresolved topics in Ezekiel and to coordinate the book with other scriptural texts” (the intent Tooman ascribes to the author of chs. 38–39), and it is perhaps unsurprising that in doing so the author(s) blended together two terms (נשיא and מלך) otherwise used with important distinctions in order to achieve this aim.<sup>50</sup>

There remains one potential objection to our argument as far as it concerns the significance of Ezekiel’s use of נשיא, namely, that it overemphasizes the military connotations of מלך while underemphasizing the military connotations with respect to נשיא; Daniel I. Block has previously argued just this view.<sup>51</sup> His position depends largely on the use of נשיא in Numbers, where it appears frequently and with military overtones. Iain M. Duguid, however, has demonstrated that there are insurmountable issues in characterizing Ezekiel’s נשיא as a return to this model.<sup>52</sup> Ashley S. Crane has also demonstrated that, although נשיא is not completely lacking in military connotations, such connotations are significantly stronger with respect to מלך.<sup>53</sup> Ezekiel’s actual use of נשיא must be the controlling factor for determining its meaning in the book, and on that criterion it is clear that military responsibility is a crucial difference between מלך and נשיא. The limitation of Judah’s future leader to a purely curatorial role and the assignment of all military endeavors directly to Yhwh, now the only מלך, are illustrated by the episode of Gog of Magog in chs. 38–39. The unmediated battle between Yhwh and the human representatives of chaos serves as a summarizing narrative assertion that Yhwh has eliminated this aspect of the human leader’s role.

#### IV. Conclusions

The intersection of Jerusalem’s destruction by the Babylonians with native Judahite mythology created an ideological discord that demanded resolution. In response to this dissonance, Ezekiel modified the traditional roles that various human agents play in the Chaaskampf framework, rather than abandon it.

Ezekiel subtly but definitively contends that the crucial failure of Zedekiah, Jehoiachin, and their predecessors is their decision to side with the foreign nations emblematic of chaos instead of acting as Yhwh’s human agent(s) to battle and subdue those adversaries. Judah’s repeated choice to align itself with Egypt, the archetype of these chaotic forces, exemplifies this failure.

Because Judah aligns itself with chaos, Yhwh selects a new human agent, the king of Babylon, to fight against chaos. Nebuchadnezzar’s destruction of Judah is thereby explained as an act of Yhwh,

---

*in Persian Period Judaism* (ed. Nathan MacDonald and Izaac J. de Hulster; FAT; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 20–22.

<sup>50</sup> Tooman, “Transformation,” 51. Based on this evidence, it is possible that 37:24–28 was composed by the same author as chs. 38–39 to serve as an introduction to that material.

<sup>51</sup> Block, “Transformation of Royal Ideology,” 234–43, esp. n. 85.

<sup>52</sup> Duguid, *Leaders*, 56–57; cf. Nevader, *Yahweh versus David*, 131–32.

<sup>53</sup> Crane, *Israel’s Restoration*, 124–26.

through his human agent, against the chaotic forces that threaten the divine order. The conquest of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile are thus rationalized through a significant restructuring of the tradition, wherein the Judahite king is categorized as an agent of chaos at the same time as the Babylonian king is chosen to serve as Yhwh's representative in the human register.

While this structure could address the immediate world order, it could not stand as a permanent reality. When Ezekiel addresses the future, therefore, a second major shift occurs, one that creates a more sustainable framework. The role of the Judahite leader is no longer labeled as kingship, designated by the term מֶלֶךְ, but as a different type of leadership, designated by נָשִׂיא. The crucial distinction in these terms is the relative prominence of military responsibility in each: while the מֶלֶךְ is Yhwh's human agent in the fight against chaos, the נָשִׂיא has surrendered the responsibility for that fight to Yhwh, retaining for himself only the pastoral responsibilities of leadership.

Jacob Milgrom has argued that the Holiness Code, likely written with many of the same issues in mind, concludes that "the kingship of man is too dangerous per se. Better the kingship of Yhwh, who rewards those who obey his commandments with peace, prosperity, and life."<sup>54</sup> Likewise, Ezekiel crafts a future in which Yhwh alone inhabits the role of king, in both the divine and human realms. The battle against chaos, so fundamental to Judahite ideology, is freed from the vicissitudes of human leadership.

That the book of Ezekiel envisions a radically theocentric makeover of this magnitude is entirely in keeping with its theological program. It is, nonetheless, important to note how exceptional the program is. From a Babylonian perspective, the human realm functions as expected (Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, is victorious), but the divine order is transformed (the deity behind the king is Yhwh, not Marduk). From a Judahite perspective, the divine realm retains its traditional configuration (Yhwh is in control), but the human realm is unrecognizable (Yhwh's agent is not the king of Judah but the king of a traditional enemy, Babylon). Ezekiel's reconfigured framework allows the native Judahite Chaoskampf theology to remain intact, but only at the expense of drastic changes to the relationship between the Judahite monarch and his patron deity, Yhwh.

---

<sup>54</sup> J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 3A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1414–16.